



Gratitude and Self-Improvement in Adolescents



Christina Armenta, Megan Fritz, Lisa Walsh, & Sonja Lyubomirsky

University of California, Riverside

BACKGROUND

Background

Can expressing gratitude motivate 9th and 10th graders to improve themselves?

- Theory suggests that gratitude should serve as a motivator of self-improvement, but little research has directly examined the capacity of gratitude to motivate positive change or examined the mechanisms underlying this process.
- In previous studies, we found that expressing gratitude leads to relatively greater elevation, connectedness, and indebtedness (Layous, Sweeny, Armenta, Na, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2016).
- Further, writing weekly gratitude letters predicted greater effort toward becoming a kinder person throughout an intervention than writing gratitude letters less frequently or writing about a neutral topic (Layous, Nelson, Kurtz, & Lyubomirsky, in press).
- In addition, employees who expressed gratitude reported greater empowerment, job performance, and autonomy via increased elevation (Armenta, Layous, Nelson, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2016).

Hypothesis:

We hypothesized that expressing gratitude would lead participants to feel more connected, elevated, humble, and indebted, which would then be associated with greater self-improvement motivation (i.e., motivation, efficacy, competence, and confidence).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 1,026 9th and 10th grade students from four high schools (516 female, 501 male).
- 41% White, 18% Hispanic, 14.5% Asian, 15% More than one/Other, < 5% Pacific Islander, Native American, or Black

METHODS

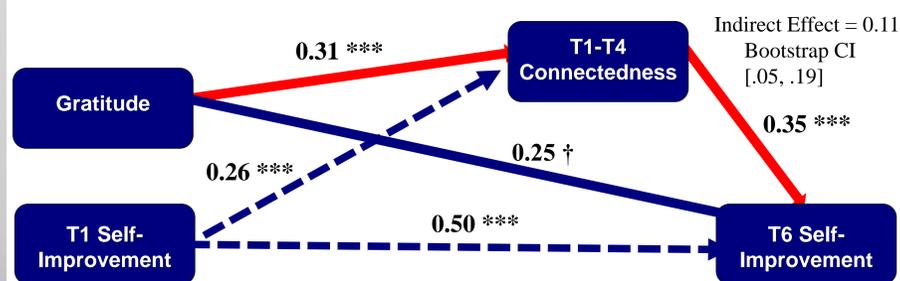
Procedure

- In this 4-week intervention, students were randomly assigned either to write weekly gratitude letters to someone who helped them with their academics, helped them with their health, or did something kind for them. Those in the control condition were prompted to list what they did the previous week.
- Participants were then instructed to try to improve themselves either in academics, in health, or in kindness (i.e., try to do more kind acts). Participants in the control condition were instructed to try to become more organized.



RESULTS

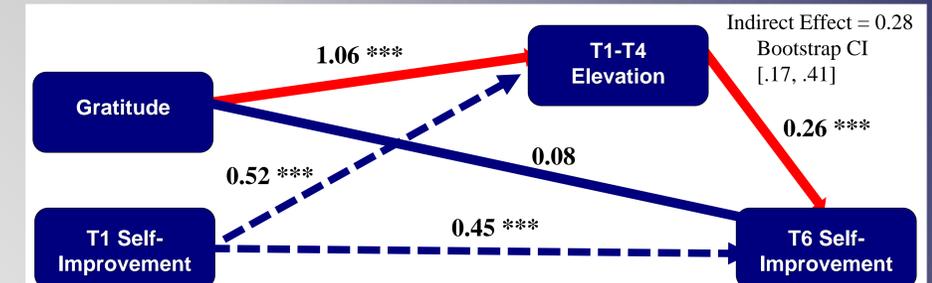
First, we tested the total effect of gratitude on self-improvement motivation ($b = 0.37, p < .01$). We then estimated the path coefficients using a mediation model, as well as a 5000 bootstrap bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect of gratitude on self-improvement motivation ($N = 495$). Conditions were dummy coded (Gratitude = 1, Control = 0).



† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

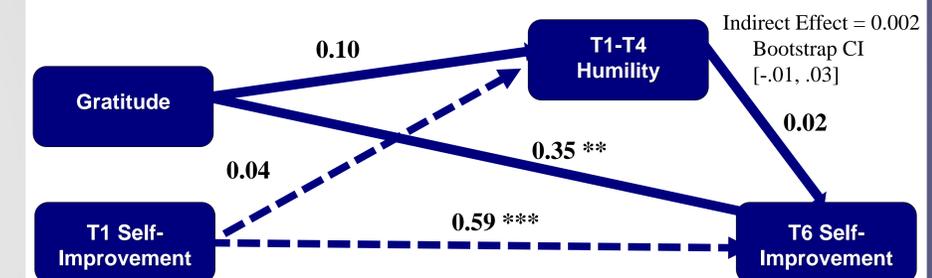
Figure 1. Expressing gratitude led to greater self-improvement motivation via increased average connectedness throughout the intervention (Time 1 to Time 4).

RESULTS (continued)



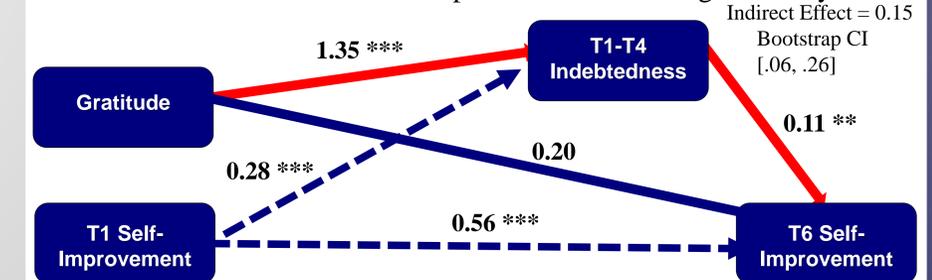
† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 2. Expressing gratitude led participants to feel more elevated, which was then associated with greater self-improvement motivation.



† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 3. Expressing gratitude did not lead to greater self-improvement motivation at a 3-month follow-up via increased average humility.



† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 4. Expressing gratitude led participants to feel more indebted, which was then associated with greater self-improvement motivation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide evidence that expressing gratitude leads one to feel close and connected to others, uplifted and inspired to be a better person, and the need to repay another for their actions, which is then associated with greater self-improvement motivation at a 3-month follow-up.